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**PRESS SECRETARY JOE LOCKHART
REMARKS AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
February 16, 2000**

Thank you, David, for that kind introduction. After four years with the Administration, I think I've finally completed the tour of all of Gergen's old offices in the West Wing.

[Maxine Isaacs first job]

And my thanks to Bill White, who was responsible for inviting me up here today. And I would be honored by this turnout tonight, if I hadn't seen Bill's flyer: "See Joe Lockhart. Drink Free Beer."

Before I begin, it's important to note that C-SPAN is broadcasting this event into millions of homes across the country. A few of them might actually be tuned in.

Indulge me for a moment, but after 20 years in the combat of politics, I've learned a couple of important lessons when facing the American people. First, start slowly and lower expectations for your own performance – so far, so good. Second, opposition research – understand the weaknesses of your competition.

So for the viewers in cable land, let's take a look at my competition. According to my listings, over on MSNBC, Headliners and Legends: the Life of Ed McMahon.

On VH1 we've got Milli Vanilli, Behind the Music.

On FOX: "When Good Pets Go Bad...Part III."

And on C-Span II: professional wrestling – no, I'm sorry, that's just a replay of this weekend's Reform Party Convention.

So, for the 8 pm time slot, this is as good as it gets.

Anyway, for all of you here in the room, let me just make one promise – if all goes well you'll be home in time to watch "West Wing."

It's humbling to be invited to Harvard to share my perspective on what's going on in Washington. But then again, I find it hard to believe I've been afforded an opportunity to occupy such a unique position in the American system. Most days I feel like a – well -- schoolcrossing guard at the intersection of the federal government, the national media, and partisan politics. It's an exalted position. Yes, I occupy rarified territory in the public's esteem – that special place between disgust and disdain; somewhere between how they view a traveling salesman and Internet Hacker.

Spinner. Shill. Flack.

Shaver of truth. Parser of language. Shader of fact.

And that's just a sampling from my mail this morning.

Of course, the student here tonight know the feeling of what it's like to be viewed with some curiosity. Here you are. Students of politics. Believers in

government. Proponents of policy....Your parents must be so ashamed! I can just hear them now... "Why couldn't you be a dot.com drop out? All your college buddies are billionaires. But noooo. You just had to go to Harvard and throw it all away."

Well, for what it's worth, I'm proud to share your commitment to public service. And I can't help but confess real pride – however uncool that is in these times – to have played some part in the accomplishments this President has achieved over the past seven years.

But on days like today, when President Clinton stands before the press corps – confident, completely in control – you have to wonder whether a President needs a press secretary at all. But then, as I watched another masterful performance, my mind drifted back to history. Imagine how the world's most important figures – famous for their bad press -- might have fared had they simply hired a good press secretary. Just think of what the headlines could have been. You might want to think about this part of the speech as the "Press Secretary's dream sequence." Let's go all the way back to ancient Rome.

We all know a vigorous defense is the best offense. The same was true way back in 44 BC... Brutus Denies Stabbing; Vows Search for Caesar's "Real Killers."

We've all resorted to using this technique: a soft feature story can humanize a subject. Attila – He Puts the Fun in Being a Hun.

[At times, it's important to present cold facts in a warm light... Tower of London, 1536... Henry 8th Severs Relationship with Ann Boelyn; Describes Separation as "Swift but Amicable."]

[At other times, just spin and keep spinning. From 1864. Sherman Liberates Jubilant Atlanta; Citizen Bonfires Give City A Joyous Glow.]

Remember, in our business, perception is Reality. Little Big Horn, 1866. Custer Loses, but Beats Pundits' Expectations.

Even the worst disasters can be deflected by having a good communications plan : Liverpool, 1912. Titanic Sinks; White Star Corporation Blames "Vast Iceberg Conspiracy."

As we learned with universal health care, sometimes you bite off more than you can chew. The Bolsheviks would have benefited from that lesson: Moscow, 1917: Lenin On Capitalism: Mend It, Don't End It.

And finally, there's this item from 1950. Stalin Denies Purges. Calls Shake-Up "Reinventing Government."

If only it was that easy. Nowadays, we have press secretaries galore, but they confront a whole new set of challenges. After all, this is the time of "news on demand," 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A far cry from the days when a handful of network executives and pressroom graybeards decided what was news.

There certainly were shortcomings to that era....but they did have the advantage of time to reflect and fewer pressures to entertain, less of an incentive to rack up sales and ratings points.

We do have more voices these days, but too often those voices are shouting. And when they're not shouting, they're writing incisive stories like "Kareena Gore's rebel years," or they're breathlessly predicting the President won't last the

week. And I'm stuck in the equivalent of a C-Span hell. Denying, or refusing to comment, on the latest salacious rumor. No wonder the public is muttering "a pox on both your houses." This is hardly -- simply put -- the Golden Age of political communication.

I could spend an entire speech -- in fact the entire night and well into the morning -- on who or what's to blame. Point a few fingers...take a few shots at Chris Mathews. I think I'll save that for my book.

I'm not going to even attempt to address all the problems here tonight. But tonight I wanted to talk briefly about a few.

One, we live and work in a society defined by exploding and exciting new technology. Two, we also work in a new culture of politics and journalism...in many ways defined by that new technology. This mixture that has left many people working in the business dissatisfied and the electorate disaffected.

Yes, technology -- from the Internet, to cable, to the pager that sends me the baseball scores -- is making news more accessible. News has become what the Internet folks call "content." Like stock quotes, digital music and online shopping,

what happens in the world is accessible anytime, anywhere. Inescapable, really. For that we should be mostly thankful. Technology is truly creating many more consumers of news.

But, technology and all it's provided, is also putting more pressure on the producers: to turn out more news, on more subjects, faster. That means more information, but less time to check it for accuracy, put it in context, or to hold it until you're sure you've got the story straight. More can be less is the hunger for more "content" focuses journalists and editors to cut corners on the basics of reporting and editing.

Here's an example where the technological tail was wagging the media dog. [Wall Street Journal anecdote]. They had gotten it wrong, and had to retract later on, but by then it had already infected the media bloodstream. Kind of like when a witness blurts something out in court, and the judge tells the jury to "ignore that last remark." Good luck.

If new technology encourages bad behavior, then the new culture of journalism rewards it. Say you are a young reporter new to Washington. There used to be one common path to success: write a straight story on the political

events of the day...and get it right. Simple. Today, there are several options.

There's the old-fashioned road, and then there's this one:

Write a speculative story not about what happened, but on what motivated it, and how politicians feel about it deep inside and don't forget to throw in an obligatory quote from 'sources familiar with the President's thinking.'

And there's a third: write a speculative story about how a politician feels. And book yourself on MSNBC to wonder aloud about the impact of those feelings on swing voters in the next election. In a world where the McLaughlin Group defines political discourse, it's no surprise that the last option is so popular.

Of course, as much as they're speculating about us, we're spinning them. Now, putting a fine gloss on an unpleasant piece of news has long been a press secretary's stock in trade. But not until recently were we so completely consumed with the fight for every news cycle – battling to win every day's paper, every hour's broadcast, every minute's update. In the fight for the edge, or the right spin, the truth sometimes suffers, and the art of politics becomes a zero sum game.

For the most part, professional political communicators don't come to work each day with the intent to deceive the press and the public. The system, however, rewards speed and attitude at the expense of substance and perspective. That makes it hard for some to resist the temptation to push the envelope of the truth. Yet, as many of us have learned the hard way, what sounds good on Monday can be a problem by Wednesday and a disaster by the Sunday morning talk shows.

Political operatives and commentators on both sides of the aisle learned a valuable lesson here in Boston in 1988. Governor Dukakis' campaign bid was undone in large part because he did not aggressively compete in the trenches of the news cycle. But I believe we may have learned our lesson too well. And the daily infighting that years spawned has directly contributed to the decline of political discourse and the increase disaffection of the public.

I've outlined a few of the problems faced by reporters and the press. Let me share with you some solutions. There's a tradition among press secretaries in which we leave notes of advice to our successors in, appropriately, a flak jacket that hangs in the closet. The actual contents of those notes are top secret, of course, but here's a few ideas that have crossed my mind as I think about what to

say to whoever steps into my shoes one day. In doing this, I also found that this advice was applicable to new White House correspondents as well.

One. Be a reporter, not a repeater.

Surprisingly, this advice applies as much to press secretaries as it does to reporters. Press secretaries are the in-house reporters of the White House staff. It's our job to sort out information from a sometimes resistant bureaucracy, ferret out what the facts are, what the full story is, and make it clear to a skeptical press corps. So we need to be watchful.

Be careful of your own sources inside the government. All policy advisors aren't created equal. Many have their own agenda and try to push the President in that direction – and may – wittingly or not – use the Press Secretary to pursue that goal. My job, like a reporter, is to talk to all sides involved in an issue to fully understand the policy process and where the President will come down on the policy. Just as you don't want CNN repeating bad information on the air, don't become the unwitting mouthpiece of bad information by blindly relying on someone who doesn't have to put their name or credibility on the line.

Journalists know this rule and they should follow it. But in the echo chamber of Washington, sometimes they forget it. They ought to check their stories and either confirm rumors – or forget ‘em. And editors should do a better job of sorting newsworthy rumors from gossipy trash in the first place.

[Sosnik anecdote.]

Two. Forget Machiavelli and deToqueville. You’re better off with Letterman and Leno.

The most potent weapon in any press secretary’s arsenal is humor. Use it. It’s the best way to disarm a hostile press corps. And for reporters, don’t take yourselves so seriously. And there’s an important corollary: a scandal isn’t a scandal until Letterman thinks it’s funny.

Three. Get outta town.

The worst thing a reporter can do is bunker down on the White House campus. Bad guys aren’t the only thing the Secret Service is keeping out. The real world is kept at bay, too.

The same is true of the White House staff. Even when we leave the White House and travel around the country and the world, we tend to spend all our time in hotels and filing centers and the same "bubble" that envelops the President. Take some time to talk to people and to listen. Politicians and the press each use polls to try to peer through the bubble, but there's no substitute for the real thing.

The best reporters also find time to get outside the White House and the beltway and meet real people. The best reporters don't rush out from a debate or speech to see what the pundits are saying. They take some time to listen to what the audience thought.

Four. Don't believe your own hype.

In this celebrity culture, it's inevitable that press secretaries and many of the journalists who cover them get some piece of Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. But let's keep it in perspective. Many of us are still trying to come to grips with concept of National Economic Advisor Gene Sperling as Washington's most eligible bachelor.

Think of it this way -- Julia Roberts or Cokie Roberts? George Foreman or George Will? Joe Montana or Joe Lockhart? Washington's brand of fame isn't and it's definitely, and more importantly, not what why we got interested in politics and policy in the first place.

Let me give you an example: I always wanted to be on the Letterman show, for example. But as a guest, not a prop. But when I tuned in one night, there was Dave, holding up my picture, saying "How'd you like to be this guy?" Not exactly what I was hoping for my premiere on Letterman.

So. Remember why you're here. Press secretaries are here to articulate an agenda -- not set an agenda. Reporters are here to cover the news, not become a story themselves. We all shouldn't take our ourselves too seriously and we shouldn't let this faux fame get in the way of our job.

Five. Lose a news cycle. It won't kill you.

In fact, it might be good for you. This is easy. News deadlines can make for bad policy. Don't win the battle for that evening's news only to find that you're stuck with a policy that will lose the war.

The same thing goes for reporters. It's OK to not know the answer right away. Stories don't have perfect beginnings, middles or ends to conform to deadlines. Take time to see how a story develops – resist the urge to push a story to a definitive conclusion to make a 9 pm deadline. One editor had it right when he said, “when the history of the world is written, no one will know whether you had it on Saturday or Sunday.”

Six. Avoid the “smarty-pants” syndrome.

We all want to show we're the ones who know what's really going on – whether we're reporters who see every move the President makes as cynical and calculated, or White House insiders who use every opportunity to manipulate by meta-spin. All for the single purpose of showing how smart we are.

Many Americans want to know what actually happened in Washington and how it affects them – not who won, who lost, and why. Staffers and reporters alike should do a better job of telling the story – concentrating less on the side-issues and dramas.

One reporter said recently that he and his colleagues endure substance, but they love staff shake-ups – nothing is better than who's up, who's down and who's out.

If politicians and pundits spent more time reporting and we all spent less time spinning, the body politic would be a lot better off.

Seven. Admit your mistakes.

It's easy to say and hard to do. But nothing takes the wind out of the sails of a sharp question than when you openly admit a mistake. Conversely, nothing deflates my attack against a journalist's story quicker than when he or she quickly says, "you're absolutely right." We're all human and that means we all get it wrong sometimes. Admitting mistakes actually bolsters your credibility, and I think the credibility of reporters and pundits would go up, too, if they didn't hesitate to say when they don't get it right.

Eight. When coming up with a plan to solve any of the world's problems, always have ten points.

Nine. See point number eight.

Ten. Keep it short.

Before I got hold of it, the State of the Union had a halftime show.

Remember, you're only as good as your last sound bite. So, with that in mind, let me wrap it up.

I want to thank you all for listening more quietly, patiently and respectfully than my usual audience. And as usual, I'll take your questions. Unlike usual, I'll be happy to do so.

Record Type: Record

To: Jeffrey A. Shesol/WHO/EOP@EOP

cc:

Subject: excerpt

Here's an excerpt from a speech I did in '98 to a group of editors in Connecticut, re: media relations. FYI.

....Let me offer a few modest, and not necessarily original, observations about the media's role in this investigative age.

1. ~~The 24-hour cable news cycle presents journalism with far greater challenges and pitfalls than opportunities.~~ Yes, you can produce more "news." But you can't spend as much time vetting it for accuracy, putting it in context, assessing its relative or historic significance. I'm reminded of that advertisement showing two pictures: the first is of a mass of thousands of stars, and underneath is the word: "information." The second picture is of a single, recognizable constellation, and underneath is the word: "knowledge." We're in the Information Age. But that is not the same thing as the Knowledge Age. As Edward R. Murrow said more elegantly, *"the frontiers of knowledge have been pushed back, and the more that comes to be known, the less is understood."*

Somehow, journalists must come to grips with the fact that the opportunity to make news is not the same as the responsibility of accurately and knowledgeably reporting it. As U.S. News columnist Ron Brownstein noted, *"there are now almost no filters on the flow of allegation...virtually any charge, no matter how tenuous the proof, is now likely to surface somewhere."*

2. ~~When news moves at the speed of light, the truth may not win the race.~~ Many of us love the Internet, with all its research capabilities and other benefits. But news organizations can put a story on the Internet quite literally at the speed of light. And thanks to competitive pressures, they often do, ~~without the usual lag time between when a story is filed by a reporter, and when it's available to the public.~~ That loss of a lag time poses a problem ~~for journalism.~~ Because without it, there is little opportunity to have second thoughts, to ~~employ finer editing, or to consider new facts.~~

Then there is the Internet's Drudge effect: pure, unadulterated gossip purveyed to a mass audience with little regard for truth or context, and often tainted by ideological bias. ~~The Drudge Report is journalism's red light district. Journalists go there, but they feel guilty about it, and don't like to admit it.~~ And to the extent the Internet rumor mill serves as a tip sheet for reporters, there is a very real risk that such sites will encourage more lowest-common-denominator reporting.

3. The line between rumor and gossip, on the one hand, and facts and news,

and quietly
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on the other, is rapidly eroding, and that threatens public confidence in all journalists.

This is an inevitable by-product of my first two points.

The combination of real-time pressure to publish in a hyper-competitive atmosphere, coupled with Internet rumor-mongering, yields an environment where the traditional norms of behavior are weakened, and ethical considerations begin to go down a slippery slope.

Let me just take a couple recent examples:

The first one involves a woman named Sherrie Densuk. That name probably doesn't ring a bell with you, but for a while back in the middle of March, she was going to be the biggest thing since Monica Lewinsky. Witness this New York Post story.

The story inside describes her as "an intern at the White House at the same time as Monica Lewinsky," and suggests that she'll be offering "bombshell" testimony to Ken Starr's grand jury. Well, the bomb was a dud. She never was a White House intern. She never had any connection to this case, and she never testified. In short, this story should never have run. When I got calls about it, I tried to encourage reporters to be careful here; we couldn't find any evidence of her having ever been at the White House. But the rumors were too hot, and the story took on a life of its own, as many news organizations followed the lead of the tabloid press. Here's the tally -- dozens of stories over a seven day period of time, including coverage on CBS, NBC, CNN, and the New York Times.

Of course, when the story fell apart, so did the coverage. No front page apologies and no prime time retractions.

To introduce a second example, here's a hypothetical. Imagine that it's early evening in your news room, and your city hall reporter comes to you and says, "I heard over in the Council chambers that the State's Attorney is investigating whether the Mayor is using the Chief of Police to collect campaign contributions from people doing business with the city."

Do you: (a) tell the reporter to get to work. Pin down the source of that rumor, and assess their veracity. Check with your sources at the State's Attorney office and determine whether there's anything to it. Check the Police Department. And, of course, check with the Mayor, too, because we'll need comment if this thing pans out.

Or do you: (b) stop the presses, tell the reporter to simply type out what he heard, and then lay it out as your front page lead in the morning paper.

You know the right answer. And you know if you chose course (b), your publisher would probably fire you. Yet course (b) is precisely what Tim Russert, Washington bureau chief for NBC News, did on July 15, when he went in front of millions of people on the Today show and announced, "*There are lots of suggestions coming out of people close to Ken Starr that perhaps the Secret Service facilitated for President Clinton.*"

I think Mr. Russert is one of the best interviewers on television, and I have a lot of respect for his experience and savvy, but did he do his profession any good that day, and did he serve the larger public interest in having real news delivered straight and fair? As Mary McGrory said, "*it's your typical scandal story -- mean, of questionable significance, and sure to produce endless rancor, speculation, malice, countercharges and turmoil in the press.*"

Every incident like this one has consequences for journalism and, eventually, for society. The toll is already measurable. A poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates determined that slightly more than half of Americans say news reporting is "often inaccurate." Seventy-seven percent of people said journalists were more likely to be influenced by pressure from owners or ratings and profits than in the past, and 71 percent said

journalists were more concerned with becoming celebrities or making more money than they used to be.

I believe those numbers may reflect just the tip of an iceberg of trouble for the profession. When you combine a generalized sense of unease about accuracy with the sheer volume of news presented in this high-tech Internet age, the public tends to distance itself from the news itself, creating a buffer built partly of skepticism, partly of apathy. To some degree, such a buffer can be characterized as a healthy reaction to unhealthy journalistic trends. It is the public's recreation of the more traditional "filters" that Ron Brownstein spoke of. But in the long run, it bodes ill for the vibrancy of a participatory democracy.

The advent of speed-of-light journalism and corporate media conglomerates is likely to have the same deleterious effects on the profession as the demise of traditional party institutions has had on the political process.

4. **Question your assumptions and guard against conflicts.** Too many times in the past six months, I have seen journalists ~~cross the line between reporting and analysis, and once in the land of the analytical, it's just a short hop to the province of judgmentalism and bias.~~ Many print journalists are popping up on a myriad of cable television news programs offering instant analysis of the day's events, and you'll see them express views that their editors would never allow in their news stories.

And too often journalists and commentators adopt a conventional wisdom about events that is so stifling it inhibits truly creative reporting and writing. ~~John Kennedy once said, "We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."~~ It is time to be discomforted.

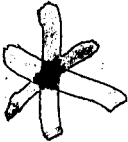
When I speak of conflicts, I'm not simply referring to the traditional kinds of conflict of interest. Here I am talking about the conflict that arises when a journalist or a media organization becomes too invested in a story. I worry that those who "break" a big story or who otherwise make it their life to cover it on a daily basis may start to feel that their careers will be affected by the story's outcome.

If your big scoop results in a major indictment, or affects the outcome of an election, or leads to passage of a new law, then you might be in line for a Pulitzer, or some other award. At a minimum it can lead to a bigger paycheck or better job opportunities.

But if your scoop blows up in your face, if the story falls apart, goes nowhere, evaporates when all the facts become known, then your efforts might be in vain, and the story you spent months covering might not even end up on your resume. Journalists covering a big story must find some way to guard against the pitfalls of their investment in it. There's no easy answer, except to suggest that editors be more vigilant, and perhaps consider occasionally rotating new blood into story coverage to keep coverage fresh. A dialectic can be more interesting than a monograph.

5. ~~Cynicism is to the media what money is to politics. In each case, a little bit helps. But too much can get you into trouble.~~ Too much cynicism in the media can have a corrosive effect, and yield stories that fall short of the public's expectation of full, fair and factual reporting.

We've all heard about the recent problems plaguing the New Republic, the Boston



Globe and CNN. Each of those cases of journalistic error appear to have been dealt with quickly, forthrightly and appropriately by each of those organizations.

But there is a tendency on the part of all of us to wall off that conduct, to isolate it, and ultimately to dismiss it as having any relevance to our lives and work. I don't make up quotes, you might say to yourself. I don't doctor interviews to make a point. Those are isolated bacterial infections, cured by the antibiotic of exposure and penalty.

I suggest, though, that there is a more insidious viral infection in certain corners of the media, not so easily identified and not so easily treated. At present, it is more of a low grade fever than a deadly disease, but it has a deliterious effect, nonetheless. It's a fever caused by cynicism -- by a view of the world that is warped, one-sided, negative, and ultimately unfair.

Perhaps the only answer to cynicism is to return to one's roots. Journalists, like people in any profession, should remind themselves why they got into the field in the first place. What was it about the job that attracted you? What did you dream of accomplishing?

I raised that issue with an experienced journalist for a major newspaper when I got fed up with the questions he was asking about some unfounded rumor. I asked him, "Is this the kind of story you got into journalism to cover?"

He didn't really respond, and I forgot what he ended up writing, but I sense he didn't like asking those questions any more than I liked answering them.

And that gets me to my final point. Let me turn the question on its head: are the issues I deal with the kind that I got into government to work on? I cannot honestly say they are. But I also have no regrets at all about what I do. Cynicism can be an occupational hazard in my job, too, and that's why I work hard to keep my eyes on the horizon.

And every so often an opportunity comes along to renew my optimistic view of things. One such moment occurred last Good Friday, when I snuck into the back of the Oval Office to observe President Clinton speaking to the world about an historic peace accord that he helped to forge.

It was an honor simply to be present at this historic occasion, and especially so given the fact that my great grandparents came to this country from a troubled Ireland in the last century. I owed it to their memory, and to the memory of my own parents -- who first showed me the White House when John Kennedy lived inside -- to be there.

"After a 30 year winter of sectarian violence, Northern Ireland today has the promise of a springtime of peace," the President said, standing in front of the desk once used by President Kennedy.

In the wake of that day in the Oval Office, and in light of the President's role in helping bring the hope of peace to yet another corner of the world, I am sorely tempted to answer all the harsh questions about this or that investigation in this way:

Go to Belfast. Ask the parents, the shopkeepers, the clerics there about the President's vision and sense of duty and purpose. He took great risks in pursuing the path of peace when all signs pointed to further conflict. He never gave up. And to this day, as the threats to peace in Ireland remain, he keeps working for a brighter future.

Go to Jerusalem, where President Clinton helped bring about remarkable strides toward peace over the past five years. Lasting peace has yet to come, but people of all religions in the region know that President Clinton stands as a bulwark against war. He never gives up.

And go to Sarajevo. Ask the students, the teachers, the hospital workers there about

the President's character. He showed leadership and strength in using force with diplomacy to end the conflict. He helped bring a nascent genocide to a halt, saving many thousands of lives in the process. He never gave up.

This President has taken to heart, as might we all, the words of President Kennedy, as he addressed the Irish parliament in June of 1963: "*The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities,*" he said.

The better life that my ancestors sought in coming to these shores is being forged every day by the policies and purposefulness of President Clinton, whom I am proud, in my own small way, to serve.

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